

“Regulations & standards work has been completed”

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It's been three years since **Pawan Agarwal** has taken over the reins of apex food regulator Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), as the Chief Executive Officer. Topics such as standards formation, strengthening of enforcement activities through recruitment of human resource and lab infrastructure have been at the top of the agenda for FSSAI since then. In a one-on-one conversation with **Ashwani Maindola**, the CEO throws light on the various issues affecting the food & beverage industry currently in

India. *Excerpts:*

The primary objective of the apex food regulator is to set standards and make rules and regulations thereunder for food industry. What is the status with respect to this subject?

As regards to rules and regulations, the work is almost completed and in final phase. Few items are left for the consideration like GM regulations, which is also in final phase. Besides, labelling regulations will have some modification and will be incorporated later (a committee was setup by the Ministry of Health to look into the subject of labelling, when the draft proposed traffic headlight system for food products high on salt, sugar and fat was challenged by the food industry). So you can say that rules, regulations and standards work has been completed by and large, barring few interventions that we need to make. Now the work shall be shifted to improving the existing standards and identifying the gaps, if any and addressing those gaps and concerns that may arise from time to time.

FSSAI's focus has been on voluntary compliance by the food businesses. What has been the progress in this regards, as you have been giving message to the FBOs to be ready for enforcement activities in coming time?

Many states have recruited FSOs, and manpower has improved significantly in the country on the food safety side. FSSAI has also started the process of recruitment (recently new set of recruitment rules were adopted by the FSSAI). Most of the people who will be recruited

will basically be responsible for conducting inspections and improving enforcement of standards. And as I said earlier, the work related to the standards is almost completed and next step is how we can ensure compliance of those. While we expect the businesses to adhere to the standards but some inspection will be needed.

And obviously, it will start with surveillance for a particular category of product where risk is high and once we know the problem area than we will focus on our enforcement on those areas.

And as regards to messaging to the businesses, it was about telling them that now standards are in place and in most cases where issues or concerns were raised by the FBOs, they were addressed. Now it is expected that FBOs will follow those standards and comply with the rules and regulations.

FSSAI is on a recruitment drive, which was a primary challenge when it comes to enforcement activity. What is being planned for this challenge?

We have issued two notifications for recruitment in FSSAI, one for senior positions like advisors, directors etc. in various departments and we shall be conducting the examination soon. Secondly for the junior level, we would conduct the recruitment in a phased manner (a total of 850 senior and junior level officers will be inducted by the FSSAI and will be posted across the country along with its headquarters in New Delhi).

I think first phase of recruitment that we have initiated, people will be in position in six months' time and remaining it will take a little longer because of some logistic issues. But in a year and half time we would be able to put in place a robust human resource structure for the food safety ecosystem in the country.

Recently, the FSSAI has issued an order for keeping a record for used cooking oil by FBOs but later the implementation was deferred by three months, why?

Our primary role is setting of standards but in this particular case, unless there is an ecosystem to collect discarded used cooking oil, it will be difficult for the FBOs to dispose such oil and adhere to these standards (set of total polar compound for used cooking oil for food preparation). So along with the state bio fuel boards and Bio Diesel Association Of India, we are developing the ecosystem for the collection of used cooking oil. We need to be sure about monitoring like, at what state the businesses have to abandon using cooking oil, who will collect used edible oil, and those who will collect again do not sell it to businesses and the discarded oil doesn't re-enter the food cycle. So we thought another three months time should be given to put in mechanism for the safe disposal of the used cooking oil. We will see what progress have we made in this regard to take further action.

Food import clearance has been another challenging area and generates a lot of

grievance. How the FSSAI is working to remove those shortcomings?

We still need to streamline the whole process of imported food clearance system. While FSSAI operates at 20 locations or ports of entry, the remaining are being handled by the Customs officials. We do make visits to some of the important ports of entry to make assessment that things are alright and see if some improvements are required in the procedures of sampling and test.

We are also getting data on how much food is being imported from different points of entry and whether or not we can reduce the number of ports of entry from where the food is imported. This is being studied to be able to put better quality control over imported food.

I think within three months we will take a view on this subject.

Recently the FSSAI has put out a notification regarding fortification of packaged food, also there has been a debate over the claim by many available products about being gluten-free. How FSSAI looks into these subjects?

Usually the main food items that people eat in place of meals are bread and cereals. So we have started with making fortification standards for bakery and breakfast cereals for the packaged food fortification plan. As of now there isn't a need for any expansion. We need to look into the experience with respect to the fortification of these products and if required we shall examine the future course.

On gluten-free claim, we have already regulations for low gluten label but it was realised that there is nothing called low gluten product. Either its gluten-free or with gluten and we have reviewed it. We also have taken note that there are many products claiming gluten-free even with wheat as ingredient in it. We are reviewing this as well.

FSSAI and Ayush Ministry are working on a plan to create separate chapter for Ayurvedic food. Elaborate.

Nutraceuticals regulations have one complete chapter, Chapter IV, for botanical ingredients, which was treated as plant-based Ayurvedic substances earlier. So we have done a series of meetings with Ayush Ministry because the line between food and medicine in Ayurveda is very blurred. And therefore we are trying to redevelop and relook into this Chapter IV in consultation with the Ayush Ministry to ascertain if there is therapeutic claim then it should be treated as medicine and if not then it's food. So for food, FSSAI's role comes in the picture.

We are in process to decide what should be the standards for these plant-based products and we are also exploring the option that if the Ayurvedic products can be taken out of the current regulations to make it a separate subject.